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SUBJECT: Uzbekistan: The Ongoing Struggle for Religious Freedom

REF: 08 TASHKENT 821; 09 TASHKENT 1519; 09TASHKENT 1523

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REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On October 26, poloff met with Chairman of Uzbekistan's Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) to discuss concerns of various religious minority groups in the country. In preparation for the meeting and in the days that followed, poloff met with representatives from the Uzbekistan Bible Society, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Baha'i community, and the Baptist Union. While Muslim Uzbekistan has a long history of tolerance for members of the Jewish faith and the Russian Orthodox faith, it's clear that non-traditional religious minorities face substantial difficulties and interference, including byzantine registration requirements, harassment by law enforcement, and even criminal charges. End summary.

The Bible Society of Uzbekistan

¶2. (SBU) The Bible Society of Uzbekistan has had an ongoing dispute with the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) about a shipment of 11,000 Bibles that was held up in Customs in June 2008. (See Ref A.) Sergei Mitin, the Director of the Society since 1993, would like to negotiate a settlement to the dispute, believing that perhaps the RAC will allow the entry of the Russian language Bibles, which had been allowed in previous shipments, and agree to ship the remainder of the books - written in the Uzbek and Karakalpak languages - to another country, possibly Kazakhstan. Mitin believes that the GOU perceives that materials published in local languages will be used for proselytizing, and as such, pose a threat to stability in the country.

¶3. (SBU) Mitin would like to see the CRA take a more active role in preventing conflicts between various arms of the government and religious groups. In the future, he would like to import a complete Uzbek-language Bible, which has never been published before (currently there are Uzbek copies of the New Testament plus Genesis and Psalms, but no complete editions).

¶4. (SBU) When asked about the shipment of Bibles that the Bible Society would like to see released, CRA Chairman Artikbek Yusupov was noticeably annoyed, giving a very different rendition of the facts than that of Mitin. Nevertheless, he stated that he is willing to try to negotiate a settlement, and poloff promised to pass that word along.

Jehovah's Witnesses

15. (C) Igor Morozov, the local representative for the Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan since 2008, reported on October 26 about the continued difficulties his community faces. Three Jehovah's Witnesses, Olim Turayev, Abdubannob Akmedov, and Farrukh Zaripov were convicted in 2008 and are serving prison time for actions considered to be illegal religious activity. All three were sentenced to "open" prison facilities, which allowed for liberal communications and visitor access. All three prisoners applied for amnesty under the August amnesty decree, and were very quickly thereafter found guilty of violating internal prison regulations. They were each transferred to a "general" labor colony, with stricter rules and regulations, and are now ineligible to apply under this year's amnesty decree. Also, none of the three is allowed to have a Bible in prison, though members of the general population are not forbidden from having Bibles or Korans.

16. (SBU) The Jehovah's Witnesses continue to have one registered congregation in Chirchik, and its registration was extended at the end of last year. Unlike the Baptists, however, who have given up on new requests for registration (at least for the time being), the Jehovah's Witnesses regularly submit documents for registration. In December 2008 they submitted documents to register the community in Tashkent, but the application was refused on the basis of incomplete documentation. When they pursued

TASHKENT 00001573 002 OF 006

questions with local officials on how to properly complete the application, the officials could not identify what needed to be done to correct the insufficiencies.

17. (C) Without registration, no religious activity is permitted. The Chirchik Church has roughly 400 members, and the total community in Uzbekistan is estimated at about 3,000. Morozov stated that Jehovah's Witnesses outside of Chirchik used to meet in small groups of 15 or less for meetings, but are now closely monitored by law enforcement. He said several times in the past two years, law enforcement have broken up small social gatherings hosted by Jehovah's Witnesses in their homes, even if the gatherings had nothing to do with religion. Fines for holding religious meetings have been imposed on such occasions. (Note: The fine for such activity used to be 50 times the minimum wage, but have increased to 100 times the minimum wage.) Thus, around 2,600 Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan may only talk to close family members about their religious beliefs. Morozov stated that he knows that the other Protestant groups in Uzbekistan have faced similar problems, particularly in the past two years.

18. (C) Mixed Signals from Officials: The Jehovah's Witnesses would like to apply for permission to buy land or buildings in Tashkent, but according to the law, only registered groups may do so. Despite this, local officials have told them that they can buy property first and attain registration afterward. Morozov is understandably wary of this advice, and said the Jehovah's Witnesses do not intend to try to purchase property until and unless registration is granted.

19. (C) Morozov reported that he used to have cooperative meetings with the CRA. For example, about two years ago, a representative from the committee asked that the Jehovah's Witnesses refrain from directing attention to the ethnic-Uzbek population, and they agreed. For roughly the past two years, however, meetings with the CRA have been unproductive, and usually involve officials accusing the Jehovah's Witnesses of violating the law. Thus, he rarely requests assistance from the CRA.

The Baha'i Community

¶10. (C) The Baha'i community has been in Uzbekistan since the late 1800s, and their libraries include historical documents related to their presence here dating back to 1915. During the Stalin regime, many Baha'i were sent to labor camps, and in the 1930s, Baha'i groups throughout Central Asia were reduced to small numbers, as religious groups with less than 50 people were not permitted to participate in religious activities. Despite these difficulties, the faith has managed to survive. As part of the Baha'i belief, members must be obedient to the governments where they practice.

¶11. (C) Baha'i groups have been registered in Uzbekistan since the early days of independence, initially obtaining registration in 1992 and then again when the registration law was updated in 1998. Currently, Baha'i groups are registered in six districts: Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Navoi, Jizzakh, and Ahangaran (near Tashkent), and roughly 1000 people in Uzbekistan consider themselves followers of the faith. There are no clergy in the Baha'i faith, but local assemblies and one national assembly elect their members annually.

¶12. (C) Two members of the Baha'i community spoke with poloff on October 30 about recent problems in Uzbekistan: Sepehr Taheri and Nailam Abdurakmanova. Taheri is originally from Iran (where the Baha'i faith originated), but holds British citizenship and has lived in Uzbekistan (properly documented) with his family for the past 18 years. Abdurakmanova is from Tashkent. They reported that they have observed a concerted effort in the past two years, and especially in the past 6 months, to harass the Baha'i community.

TASHKENT 00001573 003 OF 006

¶13. (SBU) Raid in Samarkand: In April, officials entered the Baha'i Center in Samarkand and broke up a small gathering of youth and parents. The adults at the Center were able to produce permission slips from the parents of all the youth in attendance, but members of the local assembly were still fined, as authorities stated that the permission slips should have been notarized - a requirement not imposed in the past.

¶14. (C) First Raid in Tashkent: On July 24 between 2 and 3pm, officials from the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) knocked on the door of the Tashkent Baha'i Center. They entered with a video camera and began filming immediately. Abdurakhmanova, who was there at the time, stated that five to six adults and about fifteen youth between the ages of 14 and 17 were present. One of the adults (identified only as Elyar) tried to stop the filming, and was later accused of breaking the video camera. Officials took everyone's information; meanwhile, the adults present contacted members of the Baha'i national assembly. Members of the counter-terrorism unit and members of the local Mahalla committee also came to the Center. (Note: Abdurakmanova reported that these latecomers testified in court that they saw Elyar try to break the camera, even though the argument over filming happened well before their arrival.) A minibus then came to take everyone to the police station. The youth were asked to write statements about what they were doing there and were taken to a separate rehabilitation center, where they stayed until their parents were allowed to retrieve them, around 3am the next morning.

¶15. (SBU) One member of the local assembly was asked to sign a statement about what was going on in the Center. She signed the front page of a document, but then realized that the back side of the paper had additional material on it, including a statement that

the adults in the Center were teaching religion to children. She tore up the document.

¶16. (C) Two of the adults present, Elyar and Temir Chekparbayev, were arrested and detained for 15 days following the incident on charges of resisting authorities. Four members of the local assembly, including Taheri, were charged with organizing an unsanctioned meeting. Authorities claimed that even though all the attendees at the Center were registered with various local Baha'i groups throughout the country, it was illegal for members of these different groups to meet without separate permission or registration. A judge later penalized the four assembly members with the minimum fine allowable, 16,000 soum (about 10 U.S. dollars). Chekparbayev, who was a citizen of Kazakhstan living legally in Uzbekistan with his Uzbek wife, was deported following his 15-day sentence, without a possibility for return. Abdurakmanova reported that authorities have closely monitored the youth that were at the Center that day, and have orally threatened their parents that if such incidents happen two more times, they could be in danger of losing their parental rights.

¶17. (C) Second Raid in Tashkent: On August 26, officials again entered the Tashkent Baha'i Center, this time at night when no one was present (members were trying to keep a low profile following the July raid). Authorities called the local assembly members, saying that they had received a report of narcotics in the Baha'i center. When the assembly members arrived, officials from the NSS, the counterterrorism unit, health and safety inspectors, and tax inspectors were all present, for a total of close to 25 officials. Taheri stated they turned the Center upside down, directing their efforts at the books in the Center - nearly 11,000 of them - demanding customs declarations for all of them. They also looked in the Center's storage area, which held books written in the Uzbek language (the Committee on Religious Affairs had once asked them to put away their Uzbek-language resources, and they had complied). Members explained that the books were not brought in by shipment, but rather collected from members over the years. The chairperson of the local assembly now faces criminal charges related to the possession of those books.

¶18. (C) Harassment in the Workplace: On September 2, NSS officials came to the high school where Abdurakmanova teaches

TASHKENT 00001573 004 OF 006

music. They spoke with the school director and asked Abdurakmanova to sign a resignation letter they had prepared. They questioned her extensively on Baha'i activities, and demanded to know how much money she received for calling herself Baha'i. This was the third time over the years that NSS have requested her resignation, and the third time she has refused. She believes other assembly members have had similar experiences.

¶19. (SBU) Negative Press Attention: On September 17, a government-affiliated website posted an article about the Baha'i in Uzbekistan, calling Chekparbayev a "cult leader," and asserting that the Baha'i faith was being used by Jewish forces to attack Islam and to strengthen the geopolitical influence of Iran. (Note: Neither the Jews nor the Iranians traditionally have supported the Baha'i, and Baha'i in Iran are routinely persecuted.) The same article was published in two other newspapers in the days that followed. When Taheri approached one of the paper's offices to request whether they had checked their facts, he was told that the article had been given to the paper with the instructions to print it "as is."

¶20. (C) Deportation Order: On October 2, the Deputy Chief of the

Mirabad District Police Department (in Tashkent) contacted Taheri, requesting that he come to the station and bring his residence document and British passport. He did so, but instead of having his documents returned to him, he received a deportation notice giving him 10 days to leave the country. He was given no explanation for the order, but the criminal "conviction" that resulted in the \$10 fine in July is presumably its basis. Taheri stated that he does not intend to depart, as his wife and three children are all here, but he fears he will go to jail should he refuse.

¶21. (C) Taheri believes that the NSS was behind all of these incidents, and that for reasons unknown, the NSS would like to close down the Baha'i community in Uzbekistan. He claims that seven or eight years ago, the NSS protected the Baha'i community, and he could turn to them for assistance with other law enforcement bodies. He could not cite any reason for the change, but lamented that he never would have guessed this harassment of the Baha'i would occur in Tashkent. (Note: Taheri requested assistance from the British Embassy with his deportation issue. As of the date of release of this cable, the issue has not been resolved, but neither has Taheri been deported.)

¶22. (C) Taheri and Abdurakmanova asked Post's assistance in explaining the official status of the Baha'i faith to the MFA. Though this meeting with Baha'i members occurred after the meeting with the CRA, the issue of the Baha'i did come up with CRA Chairman Yusupov. He stated that he had known the Baha'i leadership for a long time, and that he was unaware of any problems faced by the community. He stated that if they were having problems, they should contact the Committee. Poloff passed that message along.

Criminal Conviction of Baptist Leaders

¶23. (U) As reported in Ref B, criminal charges were brought in September against Pavel Peichev, the Chairman of the Evangelical Baptist Union; Yelena Kurbatova, the accountant for the Baptist Union, and Dmitry Pitirimov, the Director of the "Joy" summer camp on charges of involving children in religious activity without their parents' consent and tax evasion. On October 29, the Court found all three guilty of the charges, fining them each 260 times the minimum monthly wage (8,747,700 soums, or 5,800 USD) and forbidding them from participating in any administrative or commercial activity for the next three years. The Baptist Union will also have to pay the taxes that arose out of the income from the Joy summer camp, about 3,620,200 soums, or roughly 2,500 USD. All three defendants intend to appeal the decision.

¶24. (C) Dmitry Pitirimov, Director of the Joy Baptist Camp, spoke

TASHKENT 00001573 005 OF 006

with poloff on November 3. Pitirimov is a private businessman, owning his own travel agency and providing consulting services to other travel agencies. He is not a member of the Baptist clergy or administrative leadership, but has been the director of the summer camp since its inception in 1997.

¶25. (C) Pitirimov hesitates to call the Joy facility a "camp," preferring to call it a place of rest for members of the Baptist Union and their children. He said the adult-to-child ration is usually 1:2 or 1:3. He finds the court decision baseless, emphasizing that parents of each child attending the camp signed a permission slip clearly stating that students would be given a

Bible to read during their eight-day stay. (Note: He produced the permission slips for the court, but apparently they were not persuasive.) Each child paid 7,000 soum (less than 5 USD) to be put toward his or her food and lodging expenses during the eight-day session. Pitirimov stated that no part of that fee was profit, and thus should not have been taxed.

¶26. (SBU) Problems with the Joy camp started last spring, when an article appeared in the press about mother's concern that she had unknowingly sent her son to a Baptist camp, and that he had returned from the camp acting strangely. Pitirimov stated that the mother in this article and other parents testified in court that they actually had no issues with the camp, and that they were pressured during the investigation to make certain allegations. The mother in the article also testified that she was asked to sign (and did sign) a statement in Russian, even though she could not read Russian.

¶27. (C) Pitirimov stated that the Baptist Union cannot afford to pay the court fines, but that they may get some support from international Baptist groups. The bigger concern is the order that these three people not engage in any administrative or commercial activity for the next three years. Presumably this means that Pitirimov will not be able to continue to run his travel agency, Peichev will not be able to retain the Chairmanship of the Baptist Union, and Kurbatova will not be able to continue her job as accountant. All three have major personal concerns about how they will survive over the next three years without any livelihood. Pitirimov stated he is even more concerned for the organization, however, believing that this case was all about making it difficult for the organization to continue operations. He thinks that without its administrator (Peichev) and accountant, the Baptist Union will be easy prey for officials closely watching for an excuse to revoke its registration.

¶28. (SBU) Pitirimov said that the Baptist Union has not contacted the CRA for assistance in the past year, stating that in the past three years, it has not been helpful in addressing their concerns. When asked about this criminal case, Chairman Yusupov stated that he was aware of it, but that the CRA had not been involved. He stated that if the Baptist Union members had broken the law, of course they should be punished accordingly.

Committee on Religious Affairs

¶29. (SBU) CRA Chairman Yusupov and Councilman of the Presidential Aparat Nurimon Abdulhasan met with poloff on October 26. Yusupov proudly touted the advances in religious freedom since independence. Before independence, 86 mosques existed nation-wide; now there are 2,037. There was one madrasa, located in Bukhara; today they are located in every region. Two institutions for religious study have been opened - one under the Cabinet of Ministers, providing a secular religious education, and one under the Muftiate, used for training and preparing of imams. Uzbekistan sends roughly 5,000 people to the haj every year, and more than 70,000 people have participated since independence. Since its inception, the Committee has sponsored more than 10 international conferences on non-Muslim beliefs. Yusupov stated that 16 faiths are represented in Uzbekistan, and there are 2,235 registered religious organizations. Ninety percent of those are Muslim organizations, which corresponds to 90% Muslim population. Roughly

TASHKENT 00001573 006 OF 006

200 non-Muslim organizations are also registered.

¶30. (SBU) Yusupov explained that the CRA's main task is to coordinate the relationship between the government and religious groups. This could include facilitating interfaith dialogue, setting up conferences, and giving assistance to Muslims wanting to participate in the haj or Russian Orthodox members wanting to take a pilgrimage to Russia.

¶31. (SBU) Yusupov stated that minority religious groups, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, are all treated equally, and that problems only arise when the groups violate the law, whether intentionally or unintentionally. On the registration issue, he stated that requiring a minimum of 100 "initiators" for registration is not prohibitive, and that if a religious group has difficulty meeting this number, it can always come to the Committee to ask for assistance. (Note: While this difficult hurdle to registration was not brought up in this recent round of meetings with religious minority representatives, it has come up frequently in the past.) Yusupov seemed to allow for some movement on this issue, though, stating that his committee would consider whether it would be appropriate to reduce that minimum number. (Note: While it may not sound like much, this one comment is a definite change from the hard line taken past meetings, and it would not have been made off-handedly.) Yusupov also stated that most of the groups having trouble gaining registration were not filing complete applications, and that they simply need to be more careful about meeting all requirements. Yusupov denied that the non-traditional religious minorities (those other than the Jewish community or the Russian Orthodox community) face any more difficulties than the historically well-established groups. He stated his belief that these minority groups are proselytizing in violation of the law, and inciting problems among religious groups.

¶32. (SBU) Yusupov seemed confident that Uzbekistan is addressing security concerns related to extremism without limiting religious freedom. He stated that extremists do not generally go to mosques or hold themselves out as devout Muslims, and that those truly devout people who pray five times a day or wear religious garb or facial hair have no reason to fear government intervention. He stated that when President Karimov allowed for more religious freedom following independence, extremist groups exploited those changes. Now, the government is trying to bring extremists back into the mainstream through attention to religious education and enlightenment.

Comment

¶33. (C) As with so many issues in Uzbekistan, religious freedom is a complex picture of notable bright spots and glaring insufficiencies. As recently reported in Ref C, the Jewish community has enjoyed a long history of tolerance and cooperation in this overwhelmingly Muslim country. The nontraditional minority groups have faced extensive barriers over the years, however, and minority religious leaders all suggest that negative attention over the past two years has increased. This also comes in the context of a deteriorating security situation in neighboring Afghanistan and likely concerns about controlling any "external" factors that might get involved in Uzbek presidential transition matters when President Karimov (71) starts to move off the political stage. Members of religious minorities have been unable to articulate a reason for this change in the situation, and Chairman Yusupov of the CRA denies any change at all. Regardless, the CRA does not seem to be successfully fulfilling its stated mission of facilitating relations between religious groups and the government, and least in the eyes of the religious minority groups. Whether the Uzbeks like it or not, we will need to find ways to productively discuss these issues in our Annual Bilateral Consultation (ABC) process in the months ahead.

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